

Erosion spurs urgent call to restore beach

LBI reels after latest storm; Holgate predicament cited

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 02/14/06

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LONG BEACH TOWNSHIP — As ice melted around them Monday afternoon, Rita and Joe Lugero looked out onto a shrinking strip of sand that leads into the wildlife refuge at Long Beach Island's southern end.

The Beach Haven couple stood on a crumbling parking lot, ravaged from erosion, and recalled when just a few years ago there was an extra football field's worth of beach that's now lost under water.

"How can you let something just wash into the ocean? Once it's gone you can't replace it," said Rita Lugero, a stone's throw from million-dollar homes in the background.

After a weekend of being hammered with snow, 45-mph gusts and flash flooding, township residents and officials assessed the damage on Monday.

In some areas, the storm's toll was obvious to the naked eye. In Brant Beach, for example, wood stilts that support several multimillion-dollar homes were left exposed, the dune structure demolished by wind-driven waves.

For the next several days, between 30 and 40 truckloads of sand will be hauled in to replenish the washed-out area, Township Commissioner Robert Palmer said. It's a short-term remedy in lieu of a much anticipated long-term fix — island-long beach replenishment — Palmer said.

But to the south, in the Holgate section, storm damage was less dramatic. Tides have been steadily digging into the shoreline there for a decade, eroding it over time, residents say. Yet an emergency infusion of sand isn't planned, and the area isn't part of the long-planned \$71 million beach protection and replenishment project on the island.

Now, residents and officials are contemplating what the consequences will be if at least part of the area bordering the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge doesn't get included in the beach protection project.

A dire forecast

A six-year-old study by the Army Corps of Engineers, recently brought to the attention of some local officials, points to the consequences of no replenishment in Holgate. The report talks of several "acute problems" in the wildlife zone. The most significant is an "anticipated breach" in the area, the result of which could lead to the "complete loss of 2.5 miles of coastal wetlands, sandy beach . . . and the establishment of a new inlet channel," the report states.

"In addition to the ecological impacts, this would also leave the community of Holgate much more vulnerable to erosion and wave attack from the south," the report continues.

Why isn't the refuge part of the planned replenishment project?

"The U.S. Fish & Wildlife policy is to allow natural processes to govern the future of the Holgate wildlife refuge," according to the Corps of Engineers study.

That report was completed in September 1999.

Today, those who govern the refuge say that policy remains in place.

"The whole idea is to let nature take its course," said Steve Atzert, manager of the wildlife refuge.

Although the report is more than six years old, some officials are only now learning of its dire forecast.

"It's sort of ominous," said Beach Haven Mayor Debbie Whitcraft. "It should definitely be part of the replenishment project."

The corps' report was recently distributed to various Long Beach Island officials by a local business owner. Bill Hutson, owner of Lorry's Island End Motel, says he was stunned when he learned about it.

"I'm a business owner, and nobody told me about this," said Hutson. "I'm happy being Lorry's Island End Motel, not oceanfront."

Replenishment sought

Long Beach Township officials are hoping to get the replenishment project extended 100 yards beyond the crumbling parking lot that leads to the refuge. A letter requesting replenishment in that area was recently sent to corps officials, Palmer said.

"That's where they're predicting the problem is," Palmer said. "If they extend the project 100 yards, from that point on (the refuge) is wide enough on its own to sustain any damage."

The beach replenishment and storm protection project is pending in five of the six towns that share the island. However, the project is in jeopardy because many homeowners have refused to sign access and work easements needed to do the work. Long Beach Township alone needs some 600 easements before the project can move forward.

Brant Beach resident Jim White says he understands the concerns some residents have. But as he stood outside his oceanfront home, the foundation of his house exposed to the elements, the 50-year-old said action needs to be taken.

"It's very frightening. One day it's going to wash through and keep going," White said, referring to storm-driven tides.

While officials say the homes are still structurally sound, exposed pilings add a look of fragility.

"It's as bad as I've seen it. I'm hoping they get that replenishment done as quickly as possible. Or it's all going to be gone," said Glen Holmstron of Brant Beach.

An emergency \$150,000 appropriation will finance the reconstruction of the decimated dunes along Ocean Boulevard in Brant Beach.

A similar appropriation was needed less than two weeks ago.

"We can't Band Aid all the time. It's adding up from a fiscal standpoint. We need replenishment," said township Mayor DiAnne Gove.